

Student protests lack of ramps at art college

By Paul Moloney
TORONTO STAR

Art student Spirit Synott feels like she's been painted into a corner.

Born with spina bifida, which requires her to use a wheel chair, Synott knew she'd have problems getting around when she was accepted to second-year studies in fine arts by the Ontario College of Art last fall.

But Synott, 27, didn't realize just how inaccessible the aging McCaul St. college would be: off-limits to her are exhibit areas, cafeteria, auditorium, student lounge and pub. To get to classes, she has used a freight-type elevator in the shipping-receiving area at the rear of the building.

"I have always adapted myself to the surroundings but I can't do that at OCA," she said. "I'm deprived of regular college life."

For a college where students design devices to help the disabled, it's ironic that disabled artists are deterred from studying there, she said.

Synott began a lobbying campaign, meeting with more than 20 staff members in the first three weeks to argue that, if the school was accepting disabled students, it had to provide access.

She is credited with pressuring the administration to spend the yearly renovation budget on a wheel-chair ramp and automatic door at the main entrance. But while the ramp replaces the freight elevator, the inaccessible areas within the split-level structure are still off limits, she said.

Andrew Awad, of the student union, called the situation "terrible. It really bothers me. The ad-

ministration recognizes there's a problem... but they have all these excuses."

But design program chair Vello Hubel, whose students will be displaying products designed for the disabled at an open house May 1 to 3, said the ramp is a sign of real progress.

Synott, who worked in typography and communications before returning to school with the aim of becoming a teacher, said needed interior lifts or ramps seem as elusive as ever. "It's been a battle ever since I started. I got a lot of lip service. If they want it bad enough, they can get it."

College president Timothy Porteous insisted that improving access is a priority. Porteous said the college has approached the provincial government for special funding. Plans have been drawn up when funds seemed available but so far no funding has been approved.

The college, which has about 3,000 full- and part-time students, resorted to using its renovation budget to build the ramp at a cost of about \$200,000. And there is no money to do more, he said. "We're the worst-funded art and design college in North America. We get very small chunks of money for renovations."

Synott suggested students could design lifts or ramps, even makeshift ones, and the college could seek outside sources of funds.

But Porteous said installations must meet building and safety requirements. As for outside funds, the college has approached foundations, corporations and individuals.



STEVE BENNETT / TORONTO STAR

PRIVATE CRUSADE: Fine arts major Spirit Synott finds many areas at the Ontario College of Art are off-limits. The college has provided one ramp.

Hi Jane

These are just a few slides I am currently having slides made of a series of paintings I did this year. Being a student I can't afford to get as many slides made as I need to adequately show up to date work. However I am looking into applying for some grants.

I'm going to be helping set up a gallery in the McMill Club. They have the space and are willing to give me some time to find out what I need to know. I've initiated this project by speaking with Beth Fairley in Membership Services. She knows I have not set up a gallery before. She also knows I have experience in networking & Public Relations and I am willing to learn. I did some volunteer work with The Able/Disabled Art Gallery while it was thriving two years ago. I'd like to meet with you sometime to show you my portfolio and ask for some advice about showing & appraisal

Yours Truly
Spencer Syroff